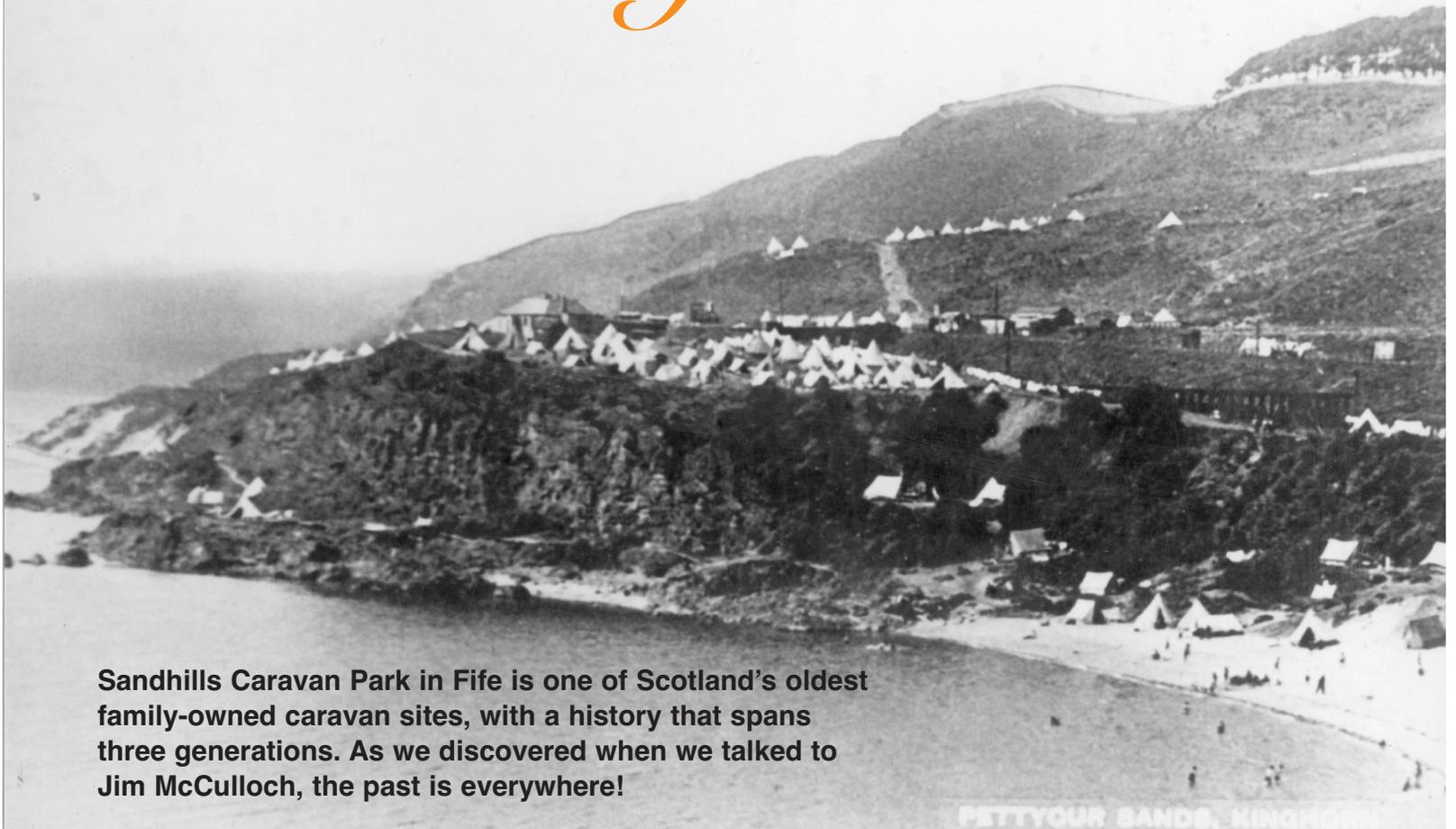


# The sands of time



**Sandhills Caravan Park in Fife is one of Scotland's oldest family-owned caravan sites, with a history that spans three generations. As we discovered when we talked to Jim McCulloch, the past is everywhere!**

When Jim McCulloch gazes out of his front windows, he can watch the waves rolling in across the wide sweep of the Firth of Forth, with the skyline of Leith and the coast of East Lothian in the far distance and the Forth bridges to the west. He can also look down on the rocky coves and sandy beaches below his house, and reflect on a fascinating family legacy that makes this part of Fife so special to him.

Jim is the owner of Sandhills Caravan Park, a small and beautifully-maintained site perched on a cliff top just outside Kinghorn. The park, which comprises 46 static caravans all with breathtaking views out to sea, sits on land that three generations of Jim's family have called home - and its unique story lies, quite literally, just beneath the surface.



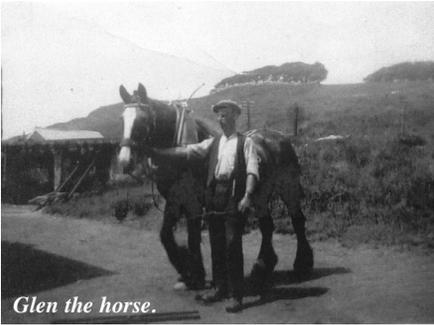
*Jim's grandfather, Oliver Thomson, had served as a gunner in the First World War, and had worked with horses as a Colonel's groom. When he returned to Scotland he was offered the position of manager for the Leith Sand and Gravel Company, which had a well-established site on the shore at Pettycur.*

Oliver must have been proud to be part of such a flourishing industry. By the early 1920s, the coastline at Sandhills was

providing a valuable source of materials for construction. On the west beach, men used shovels to pile the sand into bogies or wheeled wagons; later, the work was done by a mechanical excavator called a Muirhill, but this eventually got stuck on the beach and was covered by the incoming tide. The bogies ran along rails on the beach, and a steam engine on top of the cliff provided the power to haul them up the steep slope. They ran over a wooden bridge, and their contents were emptied into main line railway wagons before being whisked away along the coastal rail route to Rosyth dockyard.

***Horses were used to pull the empty bogies along the railway line on the beach. Jim has a photograph dating from the late 1920s, of a horse being led into the stables at Sandhills; his name was Glen, and when Jim was digging the foundations for his new lounge he found a horseshoe and the mouthpiece from Glen's bridle. A photo dated 1928 shows a white Belgian mule standing at the side of the bogie counting office with Jim's mother's brother, aged four, on its back.***

Sand from the site had already been used in the foundations of the Forth Rail Bridge, which was completed in 1890; and when Rosyth's dockyards were begun in 1903, Sandhills supplied sand for their



*Glen the horse.*

construction. A building called 'The Winding Drum' housed the steam engine, while a small bothy had been put up for the working men to use; later, in 1927, a house was built on the site for Oliver and his family to live in. The original plan of the site shows a corrugated iron building near to the railway bridge, which served as the office for counting the number of bogies raised from the beach. Leith Sand and Gravel evolved into The Sandhills Company, and the site must have provided a valuable source of income for local families.

A problem arose in the 1930s, when the LNER (London and North Eastern Railway) was forced to halt the excavation of sand because the sea was starting to erode the railway embankment. The bogie tracks were removed, and with the outbreak of World War II large concrete blocks were built on the line as part of the wartime security measures; even today, there are still stumps of wood on the beach, relics of the defences aimed at stopping German planes from landing there.

The Sandhills Company had already started to allow camping on the land, and at that time this included the ground on the other side of the road which is now owned by Pettycur Bay Holiday Park. A number of army surplus bell tents from the First World War were set up on the site that is now Sandhills Caravan Park; and Jim was told that people lived in them all year round (these can be seen in a black-and-white photo dated 1932). Wooden huts were constructed, and people even brought old tram carriages and bus bodies for use as holiday units. Sandhills was evolving into one of Scotland's first holiday parks.

The corrugated hut that was the timekeeper's office was re-located next to the house on the site of the former stable, and found a new purpose as a shop: it survived until 1984, when it was demolished. A fatal accident occurred in 1939, when the roof of The Winding Drum blew off in a storm, taking with it a workman who was on top, trying to secure the structure.



In the 1950s, Jim remembers helping his grandfather look after the camping site on the land opposite, known as The Bents on Grange Hill. He collected the rent from huts and tents, and, amazingly, he still has the original receipt books. He has also lovingly preserved some of his grandfather's original tools, including the scythe which he used to cut the grass 60 years ago.



The earliest photograph of Jim with his grandfather was taken when Jim was about four years old. Oliver was teaching him how to straighten four-inch nails with a hammer: after the war, everything was scarce, and nothing was wasted. The pair were sitting on the cliff top at Sandhills, with no fence visible in the picture. Jim says, "I later became a joiner, but I never needed to straighten nails!"

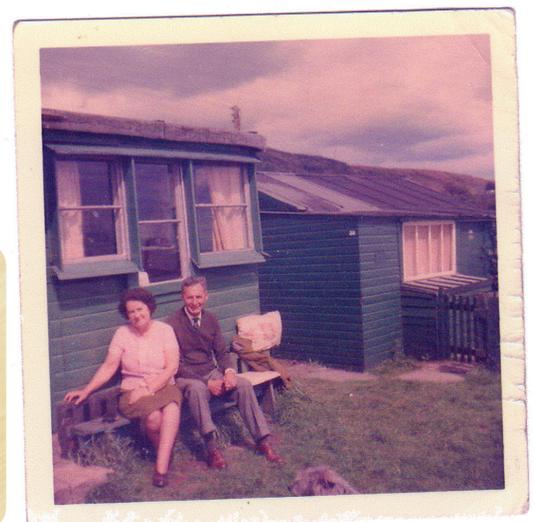
***"There used to be a 1928 Albion single-decker bus at the bottom of the site - we used to play on it when we were kids. It still had its windows, tyres and engine, and I found the steering column and gear lever under the bus. When I was about 15, I helped my grandfather to break it up; that is still one of my biggest regrets."***



In 1947, the bothy behind The Winding Drum was converted by Jim's father, Thomas McCulloch, into a small one-bedroom house with an outside toilet. Jim has a photograph of his father working on the construction of this house. Jim lived there, with his parents and his brother, until 1957, when his parents and his grandparents swapped accommodation. There was no electricity, either in the houses or on the site, until 1957. The two houses were converted into one building in 1997, and Jim has since extended it further to form a six-bedroom house and three garages.



Oliver Thomson died in 1964, and in the following year the land to the north of the road at The Bents, Grange Hill, was purchased by a private developer. The site occupied by Sandhills Holiday Camp remained in the possession of The Sandhills Company in Edinburgh until 1972, when a lease was drawn up in the name of Jim's father. Thomas McCulloch operated the site until his death in 1983, and the lease then passed to Jim and his brother. Jim had been living in England for 20 years, but he returned to Fife in 1985 and successfully negotiated the purchase of the land, including the house and part of the east beach down to the high water line.

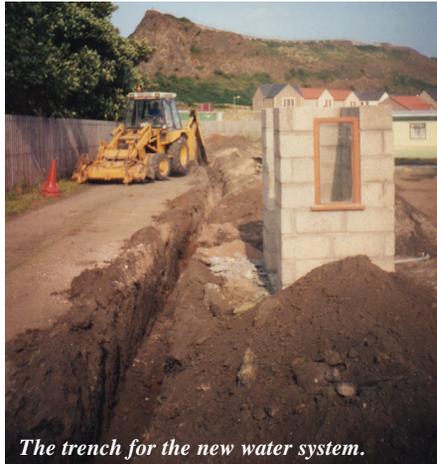




Despite Jim's natural energy, what he found at Sandhills must have struck him with dismay. The site offered very little in the way of facilities, and nothing in the way of income. Any huts that were still habitable were being abandoned by their owners; they had no electricity, no services and no hot water, and anyone wanting to use the toilets at night had to take a torch. In 1986 Jim set about demolishing the huts and removing the tramcar bodies and buses. Under the linoleum in the huts he found old newspapers dating from 1935; but this was only the beginning of what he was about to uncover.



*The reason for the wall.*



*The trench for the new water system.*

Jim wanted to start bringing static caravans to Sandhills, but they would need proper facilities, and he knew that there was a long-standing problem with the water supply. The original steel pipe, installed in the 1920s, had corroded so badly that the pressure was equivalent to pouring water from a kettle. Jim recalls that it used to take him 24 hours to fill the water tank on site. This was the original concrete water tank for the steam engine, and it was raised on legs to stand 20 feet above the ground; it was demolished in 1997. In 1984 the water board had quoted a price of £30,000 to lay a new pipe, which seems astronomical even by today's standards. Finally, in 1992, the construction of a new development of houses adjacent to Sandhills made a proper water supply possible.

***"When I finally got the water supply and I turned on the tap, it was like an oil well. I was ecstatic! I was so happy that I went and bought a car wash machine, which was totally unheard of around here at that time."***



Health and Safety regulations were perhaps not as stringent in the 1980s as they are today, but Jim still realised the potential danger that a sheer cliff face posed to holiday makers. He erected a four-foot high fence of concrete posts and weld mesh along the quarter-mile length of Sandhills' cliff-top boundary. Because he was working on the cliff edge, he tied a rope around his waist and secured the other end to his tractor! This tractor is still in use at Sandhills, where it has been Jim's 'workhorse' for 28 years.



Between them, they hand-built a retaining wall with sandstone-filled baskets, and back-filled it to create an additional area for caravans. It was a mammoth task. To complete the job, Jim and Sam used a lot of the soil and rubble behind the sea wall, which had been excavated by builders working on the housing development. Here, they discovered a large number of old, unused bottles, relics of the Kinghorn glassworks which was demolished in 1984. Jim has since acquired two of the original wooden boxes that held the bottles.

Having placed the first caravan on site in 1987, Jim continued to sell caravans and as the years passed he experienced a growing surge in demand. By 1991 he was in need of an extra pair of hands, so he advertised for help and soon received a visit from a re-training officer, who brought along a lad called Sam Duke. Sam had been working as a miner, and was keen to assist Jim in any way that he could. Jim decided to give him a chance, and asked him to start the following Monday.

Sam remained at Sandhills for 13 years before leaving to set up his own business. Looking back, Jim admits that employing him was one of the best decisions he'd ever made. He adds, "Sam still returns to Sandhills to assist with anything. He's a truly great guy."



*Commencing the demolition of the old water tank.*

It soon became apparent that Sam was up to any task that was put before him. One day, while working near the bottom of the park, Jim went down the bank and shouted up to Sam that he'd had an idea to build a wall and back-fill it, which would allow more caravans to be placed down there. It was a daring plan, and Jim was dumbfounded by the immediate reply. "Good idea!" said Sam. "Let's get started!"



*The wall near completion.*





*House re-construction.*

Working seven days a week, Jim continued to landscape the site, installing all the services and creating beautifully manicured lawns out of former waste ground. An architect had produced a design for the site layout, but this did not work in practice so Jim decided to re-design the entire site himself. He even laid all the drainage pipes and built the manholes.

Amazingly, Jim also found time to make some improvements to his own house. He added an extension to his lounge, a project which uncovered the original cobbled floor of the horse's stable just beneath the topsoil. The Winding Drum was converted into Jim's double garage, and now contains engines of a much more modern design. Jim replaced its original roof, which consisted entirely of enamel advertising signs; these were eagerly snapped up by collectors. One of the tramcar bodies dating from the early 1900s was removed, and it is now believed to be in the Summerlees Heritage Museum in Coatbridge.



*New garage.*



*"When I was demolishing one of the old buses, I found a built-in box close to where the bus conductress used to stand; she must have kept her personal belongings there. In it was a photograph of her, taken in the 1920s."*



*The iconic area which supports the wild flora.*

Sandhills Caravan Park is remarkable not only for its history. The Firth of Forth is a Ramsar site and a Special Protection Area which supports internationally-important numbers of wildfowl and waders. In spring and autumn, large flocks of Pink-footed Geese, Shelduck and Redshank are present, while in winter Common Goldeneye, Red Knot and Bar-tailed Godwit are joined by smaller numbers of the rare Slavonian Grebe.

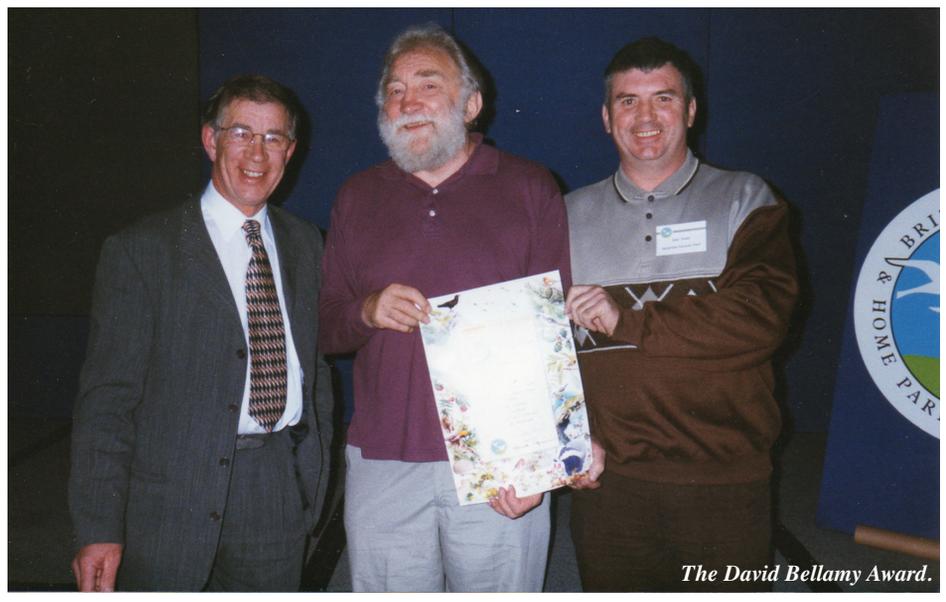
More specifically to Sandhills, the local cliffs contain a variety of fossilised plant remains which are known to occur in only one other location in the world. In terms of geology, Sandhills is a site of outstanding international importance, and its fossils have been studied by experts for over a century. In addition, some of the land has been designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest, not only for its rock strata and bird life but also for the coastal and grassland plants which it supports. Wild Thyme, Common Rockrose and Kidney Vetch grow alongside the more unusual Viper's Bugloss, Wild Clary and Thyme Broomrape in the limestone soils, while Thrift and Distant Sedge cling to the

coastal cliffs. These habitats, in turn, provide a haven for some uncommon species of beetle, and the rare Northern Brown Argus butterfly has been sighted in the area.

Jim McCulloch is justifiably proud of his remarkable achievements at Sandhills. For 14 consecutive years, the park has been awarded the prestigious Gold standard in the David Bellamy Conservation Awards: this accolade recognises sites which make valuable contributions to conserving the natural environment by planting trees and wild flowers, keeping the grass in good condition, encouraging wildlife and introducing systems for recycling.

***The awards that the park accumulated throughout the years earned Jim an invitation from Her Majesty The Queen to her garden party at Holyroodhouse back in 2006.***

Such is the demand for holiday homes at Sandhills that, in recent years, Jim has negotiated at least five sales over the telephone to customers who live abroad, who had visited the site but not yet viewed their particular caravan.



*The David Bellamy Award.*





*A view of the harbour.*



While Sandhills' pristine condition is a tribute to Jim's unending dedication and hard work, reminders of the past keep cropping up on a regular basis. When Jim was excavating the site, he discovered pieces of the old railway line and winding wheels; and he found a layer of coal when he started to dig down beneath his bathroom, evidence that he had stumbled across the fuel storage area for the steam engine. A massive oak beam, now installed over his fireplace, was found under one of the old trams, and a big wheel nut with the name 'Lancia' inscribed on it is a relic of the old mobile canteen, which was later used as a holiday home.

*"People often come along to Sandhills and tell me that their parents or grandparents had a hut here many years ago. I always ask for their relative's name, and they are astonished when I give them a copy of the original lease and the site plan of the huts with the owners' names on it."*



Jim has lovingly preserved all the original plans of the Sandhills site and its railway, along with leases on the land from 1935, 1942 and 1972. He has files full of old hut leases and correspondence dating back to the 1950s, not to mention hundreds of wonderful black-and-white photographs. It is a detailed and very personal record of his family's close bond with Sandhills: a source of great pleasure, and a legacy to be proud of.

*Do you remember Sandhills Caravan Park - or Sandhills Holiday Camp, as it was known in those days? If so, we would love to hear your memories or see your photos.*



**Sandhills Caravan Park lies two miles outside of Burntisland on the A921.**

**For more information, visit [www.sandhillscaravanpark.com](http://www.sandhillscaravanpark.com)**





*A peaceful retreat.*

